

# Barton: Short-changing children in the outdoors hurts our future (Redding Record Searchlight)

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I like to read, usually in the evening before I go to sleep. I mostly read meaningless fiction to turn my brain off for the night. Recently, I read a more substantial book by Richard Louv titled "Last Child in the Woods."

This is a must-read book for all parents -- and any lover of nature.

This is a serious, thought-provoking book where Louv researches what he calls "Nature Deficit Disorder." He interviews scientists, parents, children, teachers, child development leaders and environmentalists, documenting an increasing disconnect between children and nature. He contends that after thousands of years of playing and working primarily outdoors, the last few generations have completely lost most of their interactions with nature.

"I like to play indoors better -- because that's where all the electrical outlets are," one fourth grader interviewed said.

While that sounds sad, not only television, computers and video games are causing children to spend more time inside. It's also their parents' fear of strangers, fear of media-hyped stories about Lyme disease and West Nile virus and more rigorous school, work and structured schedules.

Also governments, neighborhood associations and the like keep placing more regulatory constraints on many wild spaces, sometimes making nature play (like building a fort, picking flowers or digging for insects) a crime.

As our children's connections with nature are diminished, there are many documented negative impacts on children's psychological development. Also, recent research shows that a connection with nature may help treat medical conditions like Attention Deficit Disorder, depression, and childhood obesity.

Additionally, recent research has shown that outdoor-based education helps improve standardized test scores, and improves decision making and critical thinking skills in students. Experiences in nature as a child helps stimulate their creativity later in life.

Knowing this, the problem becomes apparent. "If education and other forces, intentionally or unintentionally, continue to push the young away from a direct experience in nature, the cost to science itself will be high," Louv writes. "Most scientists today began their careers as children,

chasing bugs and snakes, collecting spiders, and feeling awe in the presence of nature. "Since such untidy activities are fast disappearing, how then, will our future scientists learn about nature?"

This fear became reality recently during a conversation I had with a professor of wildlife at the University of California at Berkeley. He told me that many of the students entering the wildlife field today are doing so because of what they saw on "Animal Planet."

When they experience their first field trip into the forest, they feel overwhelmed and fearful once they get out of sight of the bus.

I feel very blessed to have grown up in a rural environment, working on a ranch, climbing trees, poking at gopher mounds with sticks and running through the pastures and woods. I am saddened to think that children today may not develop the same love for nature that I have, and the experiences that I had as a youth are not available for most children, even my own.

Friends of mine (they're new parents) who read this book understood the need for their children to experience nature, but they also told me they just didn't see how it could be done. Between both parents working full time, living in a large city without "nature" nearby, safety concerns about letting children go alone but no time to go with them, only two weeks vacation a year and a whole host of other excuses.

I tried to explain to them that Louv's definition of "nature" that children can benefit from is not difficult. It's not daily exposure to Lassen Volcanic National Park or the Marble Mountains Wilderness Area. For children, it's more like a group of trees at a local park, a greenbelt or storm retention pond, or even a weed-covered vacant lot.

"...the rivulet of a seasonal creek, even the ditch between a front yard and the road -- all of these places are entire universes to a young child," Louv writes.

I am very hopeful that we as parents, teachers, and mentors can recognize the implications of "Nature Deficit Disorder" and meet the challenge head on. Living in Shasta County, you have even more opportunities than most Californians. Recognize that blessing, make opportunities for your children to be in nature, and they will create their own relationships with it.

We all will be better for it.

Brian Barton is a supervising state park ranger in the Lake Tahoe Area. He is an avid bird watcher, scuba diver, hunter and angler.